

Media Release

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POULTRY FARMS REAP BENEFITS OF AVIAN INFLUENZA RESPONSE

A year on from the largest outbreak of avian influenza ever seen in Australia, Victorian poultry farmers are benefiting from important biosecurity lessons learnt during the response to the potentially disastrous episode.

Victoria's poultry flocks are free from avian influenza thanks to the combined efforts of poultry farmers, businesses, local community, scientists and emergency response personnel. The outbreak had to be controlled quickly as it could have decimated businesses and some strains had the potential to be transmitted to humans.

On 31 July last year, birds tested positive for avian influenza on a Golden Plains free range egg farm. Over the following four weeks, a further five farms tested positive – in Golden Plains, East Gippsland and Gannawarra Shires.

In total, three different strains of avian influenza were found on six farms, infecting three bird species:

- three egg farms with highly pathogenic H7N7 avian influenza
- two turkey farms with low pathogenic H5N2 avian influenza
- one emu farm diagnosed with low pathogenic H7N6 avian influenza.

One of those farms was Longview Emu Farm near Kerang, which was the last farm to test positive – on 25 August 2020. As a result of the disease outbreak the farm lost 5,100 birds.

The farm has harnessed lessons from last year to introduce enhanced biosecurity practices to prevent future outbreaks. These measures include increased use of footbaths, maintaining separate vehicles for different paddocks on the property and building a new chick rearing facility.

National freedom from the highly pathogenic avian influenza was declared on 26 February 2021. To achieve this, almost 1,400 surveillance visits were undertaken and 2,700 surveillance text messages issued.

As part of the response to minimise the risk of more poultry testing positive, an Australian first "Housing Order" was introduced at the time for Golden Plains Shire which required all people with domestic poultry to house their birds, to reduce their interaction with wild birds and reduce the risk of developing further cases.

Diagnostics and research laboratories at AgriBio, Agriculture Victoria's bioscience laboratory, assisted by CSIRO's Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness, analysed 21,650 samples as part of the response.

The Victorian Agriculture Strategy highlights the importance of protecting the state from exotic pests and diseases. For more information on avian influenza, visit agriculture.vic.gov.au.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Agriculture Mary-Anne Thomas

"The response of farmers, businesses, local communities, scientists and emergency personnel to the outbreak was sensational – it meant we could eradicate avian influenza from poultry flocks in Victoria."

"We must remain vigilant to minimise the risk of emergency animal and plant diseases in Victoria and protect our agriculture and environment from the impacts of pests and diseases."

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